

RECKLESS RALPH'S

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation, and literature of the old-time dime and nickle novels and libraries and popular story papers.

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Francis Worcester Doughty Uncrowned King Of The Dime Novel Writers

BY CHARLES BRAGIN

"I should like to get a copy of a story I read as a boy some thirty or thirty-five years ago, or more. Its title is, 'The Haunted Mill on the Marsh.'"

Almost every day we receive similar requests from people who have heard of our dime novel collection. Of course, the requests are not all for the same story. Some may be for, "The Haunted Belfry," or for, "The House with the Three Windows," or for, "The Red Leather Bag."

That we should get such requests is not in itself surprising. The amazing thing is that so many of them are for stories written by one man, Francis Worcester Doughty.

The name, Doughty, brings no recollection to the minds of old-time readers of dime and nickel fiction. Few old boys in search of his stories ever heard of the name in connection with the tales which haunt their memories. They were published over stock pen-names used by his publish-

er, Frank Tousey, big scale producer of popular news-agent fiction of the 1870's and 1880's. Some of these names, Howard Austin, Allyn Draper, Richard Montgomery, Berton Bertrew, and, in particular, New York Detective, under which name Doughty wrote his peerless Old King Brady tales, should be remembered by boys over forty.

Francis Worcester Doughty was born in Brooklyn, New York, November 5, 1850. While still in his teens, he began to write short stories for boys' papers of the 1870's, many of them being accepted for publication in Frank Tousey's periodicals.

From 1870 to 1880, he worked as a traveling salesman, covering a wide territory, and obtaining that knowledge of the various American cities which is so markedly shown in many of his stories. He continued writing during this period with such great success that Frank Tousey swept him off his feet, and off the road, with an offer which kept him writing

steadily for this enterprising publisher from 1880 to 1917. The demand for his work caused him to work literally day and night for many years.

What was the reason for Doughty's great success? It may be summed up in the words of William Brown, a co-worker: "Doughty was a born story-teller." He could enthrall listeners with his tales as easily as he did with his pen. His writing is distinguished for its logical style, excellence of characterization, forceful character, and perfect dialogue. His stories preserve all the peculiar tang of the dime novel, but without its ridiculous stage speech and action. One seeks in vain in his stories for the dastardly villain, the Rollo Boy hero, or the beauteous fairy princess. The Doughty hero acts and talks like a real boy, the heroine is a flesh and blood girl, and the villain an everyday scoundrel, nothing more.

Doughty wrote with the greatest of ease, in his later years dictating his novels to a stenographer. He seemed to have an inexhaustible fund of invention, and never wrote himself out. The stories which he wrote in 1910 were as good as those which he penned in the gay nineties, perhaps more mellow.

His work is particularly characterized by its local color, something entirely lacking in the average dime novel. Doughty knew his New York and other great cities. Not only the famous spots, but those queer odd corners unknown to the average city dweller himself, all of which he worked into his stories in the most significant manner. Many a reader found special interest in this or that

Doughty tale on account of its locale. One got a great kick out of reading a story the scene of which was laid right in one's own neighborhood.

Like all great artists with pen and brush, he achieved his effects with a minimum of effort and space—with a few bold distinctive strokes. No lengthy, tiresome descriptions, but concise word pictures which produced the desired effects. All of his work can be read in mature years with the same enjoyment and thrill of boyhood perusal, an absolute proof of greatness in writing. Few other dime novel writers can meet this test.

Most of his earlier work appeared in *Boys of New York*, *Young Men of America*, and *Golden Weekly*, the marvelous serial story papers of Frank Tousey. Many of the stories were afterwards reprinted in Tousey's *New York Detective Library*, a big seller at a dime for many years. These early tales were undoubtedly his best ones, because, being practically full book length, they enabled him to develop plot and action properly. Still, later on, when the Tousey publications were all reduced to the nickel scale, and the length of the story curtailed accordingly, Doughty, notwithstanding his restrictions, turned out some miniature masterpieces.

Doughty was a master of seductive titling of stories. We list a few of his earlier tales: "The Last Man, or The House at the End of the Block;" "The Stone Man, or The Mystery of Dead Man's Creek;" "Found in a Bottle, or The Secret of the Iron Door;" "Done in the Dark, or The Secret of Grave No. 9;" "Nix, or The Boy Without a Mind;" "The

Mystic Three, or The Secret of the Old House on the Rocks;" "Bats in the Wall, or The Mystery of Trinity Churchyard."

Doughty was the best paid writer on the Tousey staff. His total income easily exceeded that of any other dime novel writer, and, in fact, of most other American writers of popular fiction of his day. Even in the days of the declining Tousey fortunes, when the movies were sounding the death knell of the dime novel and its nickel successor, Doughty was receiving more than one hundred dollars for each short *Secret Service* story, while no other writer received more than fifteen dollars per tale.

We come now to Doughty's most important contribution to the dime novel, the Old King Brady series. It was in the 1880's that Frank Tousey had to cast around for some fictional detective to compete with the Nick Carter, Old Sleuth, and Old Cap Collier of his rival publishers. Various members of his staff of writers attempted this creative job, and worked up many a crime investigator. But most of them died quickly for want of public appreciation. The work was finally turned over to Doughty, who came up with "Old King Brady, the Sleuth-hound," which scored an immediate success, keeping the writer steadily at work turning out tales of this formidable hero for a period of no less than thirty years. He wrote over six hundred Old King Brady stories. No other writer of detective fiction can equal such a record.

In Old King Brady, we have a detective worthy of a place among the most celebrated crime solvers of fic-

tion. Here we have no impossible character, no superman, but a real detective, always acting in character. Old King Brady does no theorizing from slender clues. He wields no magnifying glass. False whiskers seldom disguise his strong features. He is a poor shot, and cannot even swim. He proceeds in a common way, just as a real detective would, with plenty of leg work, a bit of good old Irish luck, and a liberal use of stool-pigeons.

When captured by the villains, and in dire peril of his life, he does not defy the scoundrels in high sounding dime novel dialogue. Instead, he begs for his life, often in pretty abject terms, too. Nor does he labor for virtue alone. He does not prowl around to discover crime. He waits for some paying case to turn up, being strictly after the almighty dollar. In more than one tale, his hardest work is beating some other detective to the monetary reward. In one case he is disgusted with his client, believes him to be a scoundrel, but consoles himself with the reflection that at least his fee is sure to be paid!

Here is a detective as far removed from the traditional dime novel sleuth, and most other fictional ones as well, as the earth from the sun. It is a tribute to his genius that Doughty could make the old detective so interesting to a public already feeding on the super sleuths of other writers and publishers.

The earlier Old King Brady stories appeared as serial tales. In 1899, Tousey decided to start a weekly library, *Secret Service*, devoted entirely to this detective, to compete

with his rival's *Nick Carter Weekly*. Most of my readers will probably recollect the old detective, now teamed up with a younger partner. Young King Brady, and later on with Alice Montgomery, in this *Secret Service* weekly serial.

Tousey figured that Old King Brady being so popular, he did not need the expensive Doughty to write the weekly series of tales, but that, like the Nick Carter tales, they could be written by any one of his hack penmen. The work was therefore assigned to the lesser paid members of the Tousey staff, and for several years the weekly carried on in this manner with little success.

When Tousey finally let Doughty handle the job, the weekly bounded into popularity immediately, and became Tousey's most profitable publication, continuing until as late as 1925, with reprinting, for a total of no less than 1374 numbers.

Before concluding our article, we must refer to the *Young Klondike* library, a short series of thirty-nine stories published during the Klondike gold rush in 1899. All of these were written by Doughty. Excellent tales, all of them, no doubt remembered by many of our readers.

It must not be thought that the genius of Doughty is not recognized by collectors. Quite the contrary. No other dime novel writer is so popular with collectors. Doughty items command high prices.

Doughty did not fail to appreciate his own work, differing from other dime novel writers who were ashamed of their labors, usually with good cause, we regret to say. Doughty collected his own works, leaving a

complete set of the same to his family at his death in 1917. He also left data for the identification of his stories in the various Tousey publications.

But this data is really unnecessary, as every collector of Doughty tales can identify his work by a mere glance at the opening paragraphs of the story. His fine style of writing is in a class of its own. Other Tousey writers attempted to imitate it, but none succeeded.

Furthermore, from almost the beginning of his writing, Doughty adopted a sort of a trade-mark by which all of his tales can be identified. He invariably worked in the title of the story in its closing paragraph. So, any story published by Tousey which ends with the title of the tale, is sure to be a Doughty opus.

Besides his dime novel work, Doughty made an important contribution to the study of numismatics. His work on American coins is the accepted standard today. He was an expert in many fields, an untiring worker.

Like all dime novel writers, he was a free spender, but his income was large enough to leave him a comfortable old age. Unlike most of his brother workers, he did not die in abject poverty. He was active physically and mentally to the last, passing on November 1, 1917, at his picturesque home in Creeskill, N. J.

What he could have accomplished in the domain of Literature is a matter of conjecture. But in his own field, the dime novel, he was supreme—the Uncrowned King of Dime Novel Writers!